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ABSTRACT

Guidelines are given for producing a newsletter to provide information about campus programs, activities, and services of interest to commuting students. The following questions regarding newsletters are answered: (1) What information do commuting students need? (2) What format would be most effective? (3) How can news and articles be obtained? (4) How should the newsletter be produced? (5) How can the newsletter be distributed? (6) How can the newsletter be funded? (7) Is a newsletter really needed? and (8) Are resources available to assist the novice newsletter publisher? (EM)

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Communicating with commuters

Numerous factors must be considered to improve process

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By Penny Rue

One of the difficulties in providing commuter students with a rich and meaningful educational experience outside of the classroom stems from an inability to reach those students. It can be problematic to provide commuters access to timely, comprehensive information about programs, activities, and services which can enhance their academic life. This holds true whether the institution is a mixed residential-commuter campus or a 100 percent commuter campus, although the issue is more likely to be ignored on a mixed campus where informal communications networks are assumed to operate effectively.

As many practitioners have noted, commuters often miss out on the informal "scoop" — about good courses, bad profs, clubs, lectures, intramurals, etc. As John Dewey once observed, "There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication." (1916). For commuter students to feel a sense of community on a college campus, there must be sufficient communication, a process which implies not only that a message is sent, but also that it is received.

Most campuses today have a student newspaper which can be an effective means of communication for commuters. More often, however, the politics and pragmatics of student newspapers make them unable to be responsive to the needs of students as commuters, and a specialized publication may be called for. There are numerous factors to be considered in improving communication with commuter students, and these will be addressed in this article.

What information do our students need?

An answer to this question demands an understanding of the characteristics of the student on an individual campus as well as an evaluation of existing publications. On a campus which has a well-read general school newspaper, a popular events calendar mailed to students, and a well-published intramural program, communication specifically directed at commuters may choose to restrict its topics. Such is the case at Western Michigan University, where Al Laaksonen publishes the monthly **Commuter Grapevine**. This publication evolved when Al was unable to get the student newspaper to highlight information of importance to commuters. The **Commuter Grapevine** focuses on housing issues, and is considered an educational vehicle not only for students, but also for landlords and even attorneys and judges involved with tenant-related litigation.

Informal research (asking students) or formal research (a survey) may spotlight the fact that commuter students feel uninformed about campus events, particularly if the standard campus publicity method is flyers. If this is the case, an optimal publication may be an events calendar, supported by information on when, where, and how to register, obtain tickets, etc. This specific information can serve to reduce a major psychological barrier to attendance at events.

What format would be most effective?

The most salient information will not reach its audience if an appropriate format is not utilized. Jeff Bieber, coeditor of the Ohio State University **Brown Bag Rag**, feels "you must dazzle it up a bit." Employing a chatty style, including illustrations, leaving plenty of space, all of these will increase readability. Bieber also suggests that the first issue should include an evaluation form for students to return. This form could include a request for demographic information which will have editorial implications, as well as space for the student to include their information priorities. Then a format could be planned.

A helpful book entitled **How to Produce Newsletters: Newsletter Editor's Handbook** suggests that departments, standard features, and regularly repeated information can give a publication continuity and help develop a consistent readership. Topics which lend themselves to regular inclusion might be: 1) meetings, workshops, activities 2) students' achievements 3) indepth articles of particular interest 4) position statements or editorials 5) spotlight on campus services 6) feedback section.

How can we get news and articles?

According to the **Newsletter Editors Handbook**, "Producing a lively, timely, informative, and well-balanced newsletter is easier said than done. The volunteer editor with only so many hours to devote to the newsletter must depend on volunteers to gather the news and write the thoughtful articles. Some dependable souls will come through with regular, reliable information. For the rest, the editor will have to beg, borrow, steal, nag, and cajole." (p.9)

Some thoughtful planning should be the first priority. Getting on every possible mailing list will provide current information on campus events and issues. One can then contact newsmakers to request articles or more information. Planning the topics of various issues in advance will enable one to solicit copy from experts on a given topic rather than having to write something under the gun.

Uncomfortable situations can arise when one requests an article and that article does not meet one's editorial standards. It is best to insure that prospective authors can write well before asking them for an article. Since it is an editor's job to edit, do not hesitate to make necessary changes. Any campus has its share of budding writers anxious to see their names in print. If one is willing to sacrifice a little quality control or exercise more editorial perogative, these students can be a significant source of copy. If a journalism department exists on a campus, liaison with professors can pay off with consistent copy as a result of class assignments or projects.

How should the newsletter be produced?

One option for production is to include a special interest newsletter as a monthly insert in the general campus newspaper. If the campus paper doesn't reach commuters, however, this is not an effective

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Communicating:

'For commuter students to feel a sense of community on a college campus there must be sufficient communication.'

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method. Other types include: mimeographed, photocopied, and printed, in order of increasing expense. Cost per item decreases the larger the number produced with any method. Printing is a competitive business. Bids or estimates should be obtained on a variety of types of production from several sources. A cost-benefit analysis is then warranted to determine the optimal choice.

What about distribution?

All the sages agree: mailing to students' home is the best distribution method. Before rejecting this as too expensive, think about it. How many pieces of information get mailed to residents and not commuters because campus mail is free? How many commuters arrive to campus so late that publications are long gone? To what extent do the traffic patterns of commuters exclude them from other distribution methods? When commuters have a chance to sit down and read a publication in their own home, they have the opportunity to consider planning and scheduling attendance at events of interest. Commuters on the run may do no more than glance at campus publications.

Bulk mail significantly reduces the cost of mailing. Bulk mail regulations, and information on obtaining permits, are available in publication 113 from the United States Postal Service, Mail Classification Center, Room 1010, Washington, D.C. 20066. There are other ways to reduce costs. Western Michigan mails its **Commuter Grapevine** to apartment or housing units which are registered with their service. Since many students share housing with other students, this decreases duplication. It also entails only minimal changes on the mailing list. Ohio State, on the other hand, has set its priority as communicating with commuting freshmen so the **Brown Bag Rag** is mailed only to those students.

How can a newsletter be funded?

If clear data exists that commuters lack information, or don't get involved on campus, a good case can be made for Student Affairs to fund such an endeavor. The cost could be distributed across the publicity budgets of various services and activity offices. Advertising should be considered as well. Staff who solicit ads work on commissions so do not represent an expense. Alternative funding sources such as Parents Association, Alumni Association, Student Government, and Commuter Student Group should be tapped. Do not expect to find total funding from one source, and be willing to accept any contribution.

Do we really need one?

This question should be approached seriously. Newsletters entail a lot of work, and unless they are planned and executed thoughtfully and professionally they can be a waste of time and effort. Laaksonen described a clear benefit of his effort, however. As a programmer, he had faced the same frustration many of us have faced: plan an informational program, secure one or more speakers, reserve a room, publicize the event — and have only a handful of students attend. This is even more likely to occur when programming specifically for commuters. Presenting the same information in a newsletter insures that it is available to all commuters at their convenience.

If publishing a commuter oriented newsletter seems inadvisable given the staff available, the effort required, and the existing campus publication, it may be time to begin serious lobbying efforts. The campus newspaper is likely to be run by residence halls students or students who have lived in residence halls and still operate from that mindset. They are also likely to be crusaders who love nothing so much as a "cause". When presented with accurate demographic data on proportions of commuters and assessment data on topics of interest to them or current problems, the editorial staff may be willing to shift their focus. A regular commuter feature, perhaps prepared with the assistance of staff who work with commuters, may be helpful. Alternative distribution techniques should also be suggested, such as saving some copies for afternoon distribution and putting newspaper boxes in the parking lots and at bus stops.

Are resources available?

Yes! Numerous how-to books exist to assist the novice publisher. Each of the resources listed here will also list other sources as well.

1. **How to Produce Newsletters: Newsletter Editor's Handbook** available from: Association for Educational Communications & Technology, 1126 Sixteenth St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.
2. **How to Produce a Small Newspaper: A Guide for Independent Journalists**. Boston. The Harvard Common Press, 1978.
3. **A Practical Guide to Newsletter Editing and Design**, by LaRae Wales. Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1976. (This handbook is subtitled "Instructions for printing by mimeograph or offset for the inexperienced editor.")

The following journals cover topics of interest to newsletter publishers:

American Society for Newspaper Editors Bulletin
Editor and Publisher
Journalism Quarterly
Quill and Scroll
Scholastic Editor
Scholastic Press Review